From Nationalism to Post-Developmentalism: The Intersection of Gender, Race and Religion in Malaysia

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I. Introduction

Malaysia is an important example of a plural society, with 65 percent of its population comprised of Malays and other indigenous communities, 26 percent Chinese, and 7 percent Indian.[1] While diversity abounds, political and cultural life is also strongly dominated by Islam, the sole religion of the Malays. As importantly, ethnicity has been the basis upon which political divisions are promoted. Further, ethnic identity is prioritized over all other identities in the pursuit of economic, social, and cultural interests. This is a discussion of how the factors of gender, race, and religion have intersected to characterize the construction of Malaysian nationalism and then in the consolidation and dismantling of the developmental state. The changing circumstances of national economic and political interests has given rise to a multifaceted Malaysian paradigm in which gender, race, and religion are intertwined to become objects and subjects of regime maintenance and challenge. Out of the three factors, religious identity is becoming the most salient dynamic in the country's political course. But an equally forceful challenge in the form of discourse and demands for gender rights and multicultural democracy is tempering the exclusive rise of an ethnic and religion-based trend. I will reflect upon the Malaysian search for a sociocultural or relevant paradigm that is able to redress problems created out of a skewed and perhaps too rapid

process of economic ascendance, and an intractable politics of identity construction.

The three periodic moments that I will describe are nationalism, developmentalism, and post-developmentalism. Nationalism was a period during which the people struggled to resist colonial domination, which was then followed by the construction of a cohesive territorial nation through accommodative or coercive means to overcome ethnic, religious, tribal, or linguistic divides. I define the concept of developmentalism as a phase of economic and political transformation that is charted by *dirigisme*, with the state driving the market rather than led by it. It is when "government anoints winners in business, often subsidizing research and development, promoting exports, and deepening Asia's neo-mercantilist industrialization; that is, the state leads, the market follows."[2] The developmental state that existed in Malaysia also thrived on a quasi-democracy led by an authoritarian leadership. The next phase, post-developmentalism, is defined as a phase in which the requisites of economic growth provided by a *dirigiste* state are no longer tenable or available. This happened when financial globalization arose and Asian economies succumbed to the unfettered flows of short-term portfolio capital. At this time, state power declines while capital markets take over.[3] The aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis left the Malaysian economy battered, and although there was a semblance of recovery, looming global uncertainty yielded a failure to restore a sense of assured economic upturn. The erosion of performance legitimacy due to economic attrition will also lead to a crisis in the political legitimacy of the authoritarian state, although this does not necessarily portend the swift or total demise of an old order.

In tracing Malaysia's course of nationalism, developmentalism, and its aftermath, post-developmentalism, I argue that the politics of gender, race, and religion have adapted to accommodate numerous tensions and conflicting demands. The nationalist phase successfully contained unfettered multicultural demands through the employ of an elite-dictated consociational model for postcolonial nation building. However, by the late 1960s, the tenuousness of ethnic balance in postcolonial Malaysia had led to an eruption of open conflict. Its aftermath saw conditions of socioeconomic inequality levelled out through the use of an affirmative-action instrument. This coincided with a developmental phase of economic growth whereby the heavy hand of the state was employed both to guide market forces and to contain counter-

hegemonic political expressions. During this phase, although ethnic polarization was not manifested openly, political and social goals revolved even more deeply around particularistic cultural roots. For example, Islamization became a powerful force in demarcating the identity of the Malay from the non-Malay. In tandem, non-Malay political expressions were also tied to the assertion of cultural goals rather than to challenging the construct of governance that limited the equal recognition of their citizenship status. But the rewards accrued out of Malaysia's phase of developmentalism allayed the rise of any successful dissent against a cohesive and economically salient state.

There is now a strong suggestion that Malaysia, like the rest of the once successful newly-industrializing countries of East Asia, may well be entering the phase of post-developmentalism. The economic and political trajectory that once led to spectacular growth rates in these countries is forced to take a different course with the intensification of financial globalization. There is now a restructuring of economic as well as political paradigms that national governments are wont to undertake in order to respond to global and domestic challenges. In Malaysia's case, its old political model of "conditional" consociational democracy with Malay political dominance at the core is being subjected to a reassessment by civil society. While socioeconomic disparity between indigenous Malays and non-Malays may have been narrowed due to a strategy of economic growth with redistribution, a new basis for ethnic cleavage is also emerging. There is a clamoring for universal demands—such as democracy and human rights—while at the same time partisans of particularistic recognition for religious-based systems of governance, such as that provided by Islam, are equally vociferous. It would seem that this new phase has become the moment that non-Malays can seize upon to remedy the unequal "social contract" hatched by their elites during the eve of Malaysia's independence. At the same time, the present has also become the moment for Islamists to reclaim their right to their own authentic and culturally entrenched systems displaced at the hands of colonial intervention. Today, the withering away of developmentalism has forced a rethinking about whether a national project centered around neo-liberal growth strategies and Western-centric capitalism would be the best or even the only option left for the pursuit of a common good for a plural nation like Malaysia.

II. Nationalism: Locating Gender and Race in the Struggle for Self-Rule

To put the question of race, gender, and religion into a coherent perspective, we have to trace their points of intersection back to the beginnings of nationalist aspirations in the country. Malaysia's nationalist struggles were participated in equally by the three major races, Malays, Chinese, and Indians, who were then living under the administration of British colonialism.[4] The post-independence system that was eventually set up was a version of liberal democracy with a multiethnic consociational pact, and a modern state with deliberate policies to leave elements of traditional authority intact. While a secular postcolonial constitution was enacted, a dualism was also set in place. Decentralized traditional authority in the form of the Malay sultanate was preserved, even with the establishment of a federal system and a parliamentary democracy. Customary laws in the form of Islamic family laws, or the *Sharia*, were also allowed to exist vis-à-vis secular civil laws. This establishment of a dualistic national entity also explains the origins and basis of Malay (native) dominance in politics, which intermittently seeks to override and contest the secular state that is dependent upon a multiethnic consensus.

As for women, regardless of their ethnic origins, it was the tumultuous period of the Second World War, during which British colonial supremacy was rattled by Japanese militarism, which turned out to be their most important watershed period. The events of the time led to the flowering of their anti-imperialist sentiments. This politicization was also imbued with the early strivings of feminist emancipation. Nationalist movements, of which women were very much a part, spurred debates about women's roles in the workplace, their rights to formal education, and their participation in political organizations.[5] Ironically, such consciousness originated not simply from anti-imperialist mobilization but from the modernist project of colonialism itself. But race-based consciousness has impeded any coming together of multicultural women even though they all may view access to schooling and political participation as a universal goal.

Early Malay nationalist movements were left-leaning. For example, the National Federation of Malay Associations (PKKM) was created soon after World War II and became one of the first avenues for Malay women to take up nontraditional roles. PKKM was one of the first political parties to establish a women's wing, known as the Force of

Awakened Women (AWAS), ahead of the other non-Malay, more urbanized political parties. Although women were largely recruited for populist mobilization and expediency, strong and outstanding women personalities emerged out of this political strategy, even if it was male directed. It was the return of British colonial control over Malaya after the defeat of the Japanese Army that eventually thwarted the further rise of AWAS. A few years after the British military administration resumed control, the PKKM and its women and youth wings were disbanded because of their pro-Japanese, leftist, and militant bent. Subsequently, colonial administrators cultivated the more moderate nationalist (but British-friendly) party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), in the negotiation for eventual self-rule.

During this phase of nationalist uprising, non-Malay women, whose forefathers largely came as immigrants from China and India, continued to define their loyalty as belonging to their original homelands. Citizenship in their new country, British Malaya at that time, was an ambiguous notion. Among Chinese women, it was their schooling experience, moulded after the system in China, which played a pivotal role in influencing their specific political involvements. Some joined the anarchist movement, and many more became members of the Malayan Communist Party.[6] Some of the most active Indian women also joined political movements being fought in India. In 1941, when Chandra Bose formed the Indian Independence Movement and the Indian Independence Army, Indian women in Malaya were recruited to be part of the Rhani of Jansi Regiment of the Army, and travelled to Burma to make their way into India.[7] Despite having anti-colonialism as a common defining purpose, the mobilization for such a cause was still forged along an uncommon identity-distinct platform. The concept of a liberated nation-state was not necessarily the physical ground upon which one stood.

These reasons explain why party politics that downplayed ethnic differences were unsuccessful in attracting adherents. The Independence of Malaya Party (IMP), set up in 1951 with its membership open to all races, specifically promised equal opportunities, regardless of sex. However, it barely survived for a year after its formation. Another multiracial party, the Parti Negara, was launched in 1954 and even promised equal pay for equal work, and equal opportunities as well as emancipation for women. This party, too, failed to leave a mark in the country's first election. Another non-communal party, the Pan-

Malayan Labour Party, which committed itself to ensuring women's equality by including a proposal for a Women's Charter, was also unsuccessful in garnering mass electoral support. Malaysian women's early involvement in formal politics was only successful if it followed the model of the inter-ethnic consociational "cartel." Nationalism was based on particularistic ethnic concerns and therefore overrode all other political projects, such as feminism or labor unionism. Even though women's rights were recognized as an important objective by the nationalists, they could not be universally or successfully forged, given that women of the different races did not get together.

It was only six years after independence, in 1963, that a significant nongovernmental multiracial woman's organization, the National Council for Women's Organizations (NCWO), was formed.The creation of the NCWO was spurred by the issue of women's unequal pay, which was first highlighted by the Women Teacher's Union, an organization formed in 1960.[8] Women's unequal pay was an issue that strongly galvanized middle-class and urban-based women. The impetus for the formation of the NCWO also came from an overall global trend in the 1960s to gain recognition for the rights of working women. International bodies like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) contributed significantly to the formation of the NCWO. In fact, it was at the YWCA's initiative that a conference of women's groups was organized in 1960, and the NCWO was subsequently formed. In tandem with this development, the NCWO's establishment was further boosted by the close cooperation of the women's wing of UMNO, the then premier Malay party. The woman leader of UMNO saw in the NCWO a formal structure that could serve as an umbrella coalition for the different groups that the party had mobilized.[9]

The NCWO became the vehicle through which legislative reforms granting equal pay, women's equal access to public service jobs, and marital rights were achieved. Several of the Chairpersons of the NCWO had also been women ministers in the cabinet, making the NCWO not only a close ally of the government, but a mirror of the elite consociational-democratic model adopted by the ruling coalition party. Although non-partisan, the identification of NCWO with the ruling government was so strong that representatives from two opposition parties, the Socialist and Islamic parties, withdrew their membership from the organization in 1965.[10]

The politics of inter-ethnic compromise, accommodation, and bargaining, as levers for successful negotiations with the British for even-

tual self-rule, also influenced the style of women's involvement in formal politics after the independent nation-state came into being. The Alliance party, which became the first government, originally consisted of three ethnic-based parties, the UMNO (United Malays National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), and the MIC (Malayan Indian Congress). They all did their part in sponsoring women's entry into politics. The few women candidates fielded in national elections by their respective ethnic-based parties have comfortably won elections on the strength of their parties.[11] Such a tradition ensured women's unfailing presence in electoral politics but did not allow women leaders to test social limits or to challenge entrenched systems through parliamentary democracy. Since women's wings occupy a subordinate status within their parties, women who were nominated to stand and got elected were inevitably more beholden to their patrons in the party than to their electorates outside.[12] Internal reforms to break the vicious circle of gender inequality within party structures have also never occurred in post-independence Malaysia. Furthermore, the strength in numbers of women voters has failed to translate into gender reforms. Thus, the issue of women's representation in parliament has remained irrelevant as a precondition for gender empowerment despite the strong perception that the women's role in formal politics can lead to a change for women.[13] This is a condition which is not unlike that experienced by other Asian countries where women's formal representation in national legislatures has been less important in pushing for women-oriented policies than has the role played by autonomous women's groups.[14]

III. Developmentalism: The Making of an Authoritarian-Developmental State and the Construction of Identity Politics

With the waning of nationalist ideology as the basis for political activism, Malaysia entered its postcolonial phase, potentially vulnerable to ethnic dissension and worsening race relations. The basis for this was the marked socioeconomic gap between politically dominant but poorer Malays and the economically advanced but politically disenfranchised non-Malays. In 1969, an open and violent ethnic clash broke out between Malays and Chinese in the city of Kuala Lumpur. Although isolated to this one city, the event provided enough fuel to become the turning point in Malaysia's history of multiethnic nation building. Out of this racially violent confrontation, national strategies

were restructured to remedy the sense of Malay grievance born out of the tragedy. Pressure to overcome the condition of Malay economic backwardness led to the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), an affirmative-action instrument designed to redress the economic inequality experienced by the indigenous community, *Bumiputera*, vis-à-vis the non-*Bumiputera*.[15] This policy of social engineering through extensive state intervention was justified with the rationale that the economic mobility of Malays and indigenous people had been unfairly denied by history.

After three decades of implementation, beginning in 1972, the NEP delivered both positive and adverse changes. The socioeconomic disparity between Malays and Chinese has been narrowed, and there has been a rapid rate of urbanization among the formerly rural-based Malay population, thus allowing them to enter the modern workforce in large numbers. This narrowing of the economic gap has subsequently contributed to the swelling of a Malay urban middle-class. It will be seen later that this factor alone may have precipitated a "new" politics in Malaysia. On the downside, the social distributive function of the NEP has been distorted, resulting in the creation of a small class of wealthy Malay capitalists, along with the rise of capitalists of all races. The institutionalization of patronage politics, business cronyism, and corruption were also some of the adverse consequences of the unchecked aspects of the policy. In other words, its implementation has spawned a high degree of clientelistic politics. But more than affecting the social and economic structure of the country, the NEP was the discourse and substance upon which the Malaysian politics of gender, race, and religion were continually shaped.

There developed a syndrome in which, with the NEP's implementation, virtually all aspects of Malaysia's political, social, and cultural lives were to become ethnically reduced, or hyperethnicized. The term *hyperethnicity* is used here to mean an all-encompassing ethnicization whose defenders constantly try to subsume any politics that are outside of the goal of the preservation of ethnic particularities. In Malaysia's phase of developmentalism, despite the existence of an overarching national agenda for economic growth, there was a heightening of identity politics, acting as a form of boundary closure to mark off the *Bumiputera* or, largely, the Malay from the non-Malay. Islam as a religion was simultaneously incorporated to lend more definitive authenticity to the identity of the cultural Malay or was used to displace the old, maligned Malay characterizations ("the lazy native"),

purported to be the source of the group's backwardness. For this, a new, "Islamized" identity was adopted by Malays, as it was more assertive and forceful, and had strength in a global movement. Having been "peripheralized" and "ossified" by colonial protectionist policy, they found that the only way out of this rut was to embrace new parameters for a Malay reassertion.[16]

Subsequently, specific political causes became formally and informally identified as the exclusive domain of particular ethnic groups (Islamic women's rights to be articulated only by Muslims, Chinese education rights to be taken up only by Chinese political parties, and estate worker's rights only by Indian political parties). As a result, it was difficult to universalize any cross-ethnic political projects. Autonomous civil society was enfeebled by this situation of hyperethnicization, while the other, bigger, ethnically polarized and encapsulated civil society largely became a mere extension of the state.[17] The inevitable outcome of the NEP was that it was implemented through a series of legal instruments that enhanced the repressive apparatuses of the state to limit civil and political freedoms.[18] Ultimately, people either pragmatically acquiesced to the national project (largely, a disempowered non-Malay constituency); instrumentally accepted it (largely, those who had the capacity to benefit from it); or reinforced identity politics through it for the further assertion of political dominance and exclusivity (largely, Malays and Muslims).[19] Nevertheless, despite the increasing shroud of political apathy, the tightening of civil liberties, and the reinforcement of identity politics, the spectacular economic growth that Malaysia experienced ensured that all of these reactions would persist with minimal social costs to the state.

As the cycle of pragmatic acquiescence, instrumental acceptance, and identity reinforcement spiralled and intensified, the residual civil society with its articulation of more universal causes—such as justice, democracy, accountable governance, and human rights—struck little resonance with this polarized polity. Even if there were to be formidable counterhegemonic dissent, this, too, had to be fostered within an ethnicized space. The Islamic counterhegemonic movement, the *Darul Arqam*, was mobilized exclusively among Malays, while at the level of formal representative politics, the biggest opposition party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), was Chinese based and Chinese supported.

The sweep of Islamization was not merely necessitated by an economically induced cultural project; it was also reinforced by a political void created by the imperatives of an authoritarian and developmental

state to contain civil society elements, beginning with communist insurgents. Its "Cold War" fervor in suppressing communist, socialist, leftist, and labor movements in postcolonial Malaysia (particularly after the May 1969 riots) led to the destruction of a once-vibrant civil society. In such an atmosphere, Islam remained as one of the last bastions, if not the only legitimate site, for limited counterhegemony. Among Muslims, the space provided by Islam became the only feasible ambit within which divergent, though circumscribed, political expressions could find root. Islam was in actual fact a two-edged sword. It was a force that the state wanted to contain as well as to co-opt. It served to legitimize the politics of "Malay domination" but, on the other hand, it was also the site in which remnants of any Malay opposition (or its latent variety) could safely be ensconced. As such, even as Islamization was co-opted as a state project, the strongest opposition against this state was the Islamic party.

Non-Muslim Malaysians largely chose the route of compliance because, for them, post-independence, post-1969 Malaysian politics spelled "the end of ideology," or an end to class politics that they previously engaged in to countermand divisive ethnic politics and affirm a political role for themselves. But the deployment of draconian measures eventually marginalized dissidents of the Left, a majority of whom were Chinese. In addition to demolishing the ideological presence of the Left, the state also obscured the nascent project for multicultural democratization. Chinese activists (even among those with a leftist tradition) diverted their political energies into fighting for issues within ethnicized rubrics, such as Chinese language, education, and cultural rights, often within the safe limits of electoral politics.[20] Later, as the developmental state — with its relentless agenda for economic growth — took precedence over the dictates of Cold War politics, a majority of Malaysians simply chose the path of pragmatic acquiescence. They became driven by self-seeking economic interests rather than by wider political goals, which were becoming elusive and practically unobtainable. Whatever dissent or sense of dejection they had over the legitimacy of the state gradually transmuted into an instrumentalist acceptance of what the state was able to offer in the form of economic gains and expedient notions of cultural "freedoms."[21] This contributed further to the hyperethnicization of the polity, with a culturally and politically engaged Islamized Malay polity on one side, in conjunction with an instrumentally depoliticized and pragmatic non-Malay polity on the other. A once oppositional Chinese-based regional

party, the Gerakan, exemplified the condition of instrumental depoliticization when it decided to join the ruling National Front as a coalition partner during the first national election of the post-1969 period.[22] Chinese political parties acted upon a perception that they could bargain for their circumscribed rights more effectively within the UMNO-led national coalition than if they were outside of it. But the two Chinese parties, the MCA and Gerakan, have in effect played second fiddle to UMNO, steering clear of challenging the reified notion of Malay dominance, or pushing the limits of Chinese economic or cultural rights beyond the NEP norms. A small and disempowered non-Malay sector, in unity with a smaller sector of the Malay polity, constituted whatever was left of civil society. This residual civil society, enfeebled by hyperethnicization, nevertheless sustained itself through the promotion of movements for labor and environmental, consumer, democratic, human, and women's rights.

Despite the overwhelming tide of Islamization and the reaffirmation of ethnic divides, the feminist movement did manage to take root in the country. However, it mainly coalesced around the violence-against-women (VAW) issue. The peculiarity of local political and economic conditions made it difficult for the movement to expand beyond its middle-class, urban, and largely non-Malay enclave. Violence against women was the only issue left that had a common denominator in every woman's life, regardless of class and ethnicity. It was also simply the only site not captured or hyperethnicized by the state. Thus, for almost two decades, feminist organizing centered not only strategically but also pragmatically around the issue of VAW.[23]

The growth of the feminist movement in the 1980s was also not able to draw the support of a new group of working-class women created out of Malaysia's experience of rapid industrialization. Starting in the late 1970s, there was a massive and rapid entry of rural women into the industrial workforce.[24] The "horrors" of waged work and cultural dislocation seemed to lend the right conditions for their political mobilization. Yet this did not happen. First, as soon as the country embarked upon attracting foreign investments for its export sector, laws were enacted that prohibited unionization among workers in the foreign-owned electronic sector, where women were largely located. Second, since a majority of industrial workers were Malay Islamic women, there was a culturally induced form of resistance against unionization and feminism. In the early years of export-led industrialization, the involvement of Malay women in factory work was not

looked upon kindly. Women were labelled "morally loose" and considered "easy sexual prey" due to an array of new "administrative and regulatory mechanisms."[25] Young, unmarried, rural women were brought out from their villages for the first time and were housed as a group in the cities without parental supervision, a practice that was uncommon at that time. As if to redeem their sullied moral identities, after having been subjected to a slew of cultural admonishments by representatives of their own communities, Malay women workers situated their loyalty even more definitively within their ethnicity rather than class.[26] Pressure to preserve the moral fabric of being Malay, which was also undergoing a reconstitution through Islam at this same time, reaffirmed the women's role in the reproduction of the patriarchal family, even though massive numbers of rural women were experiencing a change in their economic status.

The feminist movement was even more detached from the reach of rural, peasant women. The rural Malay constituency was a domain that was almost wholly "hegemonized" by Malay political forces that either represented the state or the opposition. The ruling Malay party, UMNO, heavily patronized the Malay peasantry because rural constituencies were delineated so as to increase the number of Malay-majority seats. This gave the greatest electoral advantage to Malay candidates who stood under UMNO. As these constituencies were strategic for UMNO's electoral dominance, the state maintained a tight control over Malay villages. State development committees, although set up and funded by the state, were *de facto* the eyes and ears of the party. Resources and subsidies were channelled through these committees, in exchange for political loyalty toward the party.[27] Nevertheless, despite UMNO's rural hegemony, the main opposition party, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), also succeeded in building up its base within the rural enclave. One reason why PAS was successful was that there inevitably existed various lacunae in UMNO's patronage net, especially since resources are not limitless. It is not coincidental that some of the poorest villages in the poorest Malay states are also the hotbed of Islamic opposition politics, where economic or social deprivation of the rural poor are being articulated through the language of Islam. During the pre-independence phase, when the state maintained a weaker hegemony over the peasantry, insurgent movements succeeded in establishing their bases in the rural interior and recruited peasant women into various nationalist movements, including that of the outlawed Malayan Communist Party. Unlike gender activism asso-

ciated with nationalist movements of the past, contemporary feminist groups have been unable to make any inroads into the rural Malay heartland. Quite clearly, the feminism that was promoted in Malaysia's developmental phase was ensconced within a particularistic middle-class and Western-liberal framework, hence undermining its ability to universalize the causes of gender rights and equality.

At this time, a large majority of Malay-Muslim, middle-class, and professional women did not find it necessary to engage with feminism because a majority of them, especially youths, were drawn to Islamic movements, either by choice or peer pressure. These movements ranged from fundamentalist-radical, even counterhegemonic (such as the *Darul Arqam*), to those characterized as modernist and mainstream because they had close ties with the ruling party, UMNO, such as the Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM). There were also NGOs, for example the Islamic Reform Congregation (JIM), which drew a large part of their membership from Malays studying abroad. JIM claims to be a movement of "reform," and draws people to the Islamic way of life through the charitable acts of providing educational and health services to the community. Many women professionals, such as doctors and teachers, have been involved in the provision of such services.

The overall project of Islamic movements was to integrate, not separate, gender interests within the larger rubric of Islamization. Educated, professional Muslim women within these organizations advocated the principle of gender complementarity rather than equality. Even though the VAW campaigns during the 1980s and 1990s were participated in by a wide spectrum of women's groups, ranging from mainstream to feminist (largely non-Malay based), the absence of Malay women's representatives from Islamic groups was quite stark. But it must also be noted that, with the exception of the *Darul Arqam*, the main urban Islamic groups that had large women's membership, particularly ABIM and JIM, belonged to the Islamic mainstream. Like the other hyperethnicized components of civil society, they were also an extension of the state (which portrayed itself as committed to Islamic governance), and did not identify with labor, women's, or human rights causes in any prominent way. Even the VAW issue did not provide enough of a bridge to bring middle-class Islamic women and feminist groups together. In fact, when the Domestic Violence Act was passed in 1994, women members of ABIM voiced their concern that this legislation did not differentiate the legal jurisdictions of Muslim women from non-Muslim women.[28] Their point was that Muslim

women and issues affecting their status within the family could not be governed by a civil act, as only the *Sharia* family law would have jurisdiction over them.[29] They were making the point that the *Sharia* had an in-built provision to deal with the issue of spousal violence.

Most Muslim movements in the mid-1990s were also under the direct or tacit sponsorship of the state. Even the *Darul Arqam*, with its "non-mainstream" Islamic activities, could get around state proscriptions by garnering its own cultural legitimacy among ordinary Malays. The rest of the Islamic civil society was a "captured civil society," performing its role as the purveyor of the ideology of separateness and exclusivity. It was only after the sacking of Anwar in September 1998 that ABIM (being founded by Anwar himself in the 1970s) found itself to be on the opposite side of the Mahathir government. JIM, which had an image of being non-partisan before the Anwar crisis, almost instantly took an active, even partisan, role in the *Reformasi* movement.

IV. Post-Developmentalism: Crisis, Realignment, and the Search for a New Politics

The Asian Crisis of 1997 was significant in terms of the economic damage and political upheaval that it brought to the formerly prosperous East Asian newly-industrializing countries. Malaysia had an erstwhile stable and confident newly-industrializing status until 1997, when the crisis struck the region. Malaysia's once-assured economic trajectory of growth and stability is currently being subjected to numerous reassessments. Scholars have yet to describe this new phase in Southeast Asian development with any clear and definitive label. What is obvious, however, is that the state of quasi-democracy promoted by the authoritarian governments of the region to direct their countries' economic performance is now undergoing some kind of deconstruction as well as a reconstruction.

Does gender matter at all during periods of social and political upheaval? Looking back through the modern historical formation of Malaysia, it is quite clear that gender does matter during periods of dramatic change, or transitional periods that divide the passing away of an old order from the initiation of a new one. This essay does not categorically suggest that what we are seeing in Malaysia is a clear transitional moment. Whether Malaysia's old order is at the brink of its existence is a highly debatable question. In Malaysia, the prefix "post"

can hardly be applied to any of its constructs with great sureness, yet all this may belie a silent anger festering within the system.

It is a fact that Prime Minister Mahathir's dismissal of his deputy Anwar from office in September 1998 swiftly sparked a *Reformasi* (reformation) movement.[30] Almost as soon as Anwar was dismissed from government, many of the Malay-Muslim mainstream organizations rallied to seek justice for Anwar against what they perceived to be Mahathir's unjust and "un-Islamic" tactic of political assassination. This was eventually articulated as a wider struggle for transparent governance and democratization. Subsequently, Anwar's prison assault, unfair trial, and simultaneous exposure of government corruption eventually affected a broader spectrum of the civil society, leading to the emergence of a coalition of plural forces, consisting of formal political parties and autonomous movements. The Alternative Front opposition coalition (the BA) was formed and consisted of four major parties, namely, the Islamic Party (PAS), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the People's Party (PRM) and the newly formed National Justice Party (Keadilan). It was reflective of this "rainbow" partnership, which seized upon the situation of a weakening state as an opportunity for rebuilding and reconstituting the strength of counterhegemonic forces, or of the residual civil society against an overpowering state.

The question is why would Malay elites, who derived clear advantages from the state's affirmative-action policy, suddenly embrace a cross-ethnic opposition movement after the financial crisis? In addition, why would secular feminists as well as the residual but autonomous civil society also find it necessary to participate in this multiethnic and multisectarian coalition? It must be stressed that it was not the financial crisis per se that led to the ascendancy of this *Reformasi* wave. In the early stages, it was a largely Malay-based outrage. Anwar, a charismatic, former dissident Islamic activist, was considered an icon of reformist Islam when he was brought on board to join UMNO in 1982. Hence, his dismissal angered a section of the urban-based Malay middle-class, which had identified with Anwar's Islamist aspirations. By 1998, the NEP had also created a core of self-assured Malay middle-class people who were less dependent upon government patronage for upward mobility, and thus had few qualms about being more critical of the UMNO-led government. Another reason why the cross-ethnic opposition movement came about was due to the impending national election of 1999. There was a strong sense that

the ruling National Front government could either be unseated or denied its hitherto unbroken record of winning a two-thirds majority, given the level of disaffection that had been generated, both from its handling of the financial crisis and over the Anwar issue. The strategy of building this coalition was pragmatic since it increased the chance of unseating the incumbent government.

Without the financial crisis erupting in tandem with the Anwar episode, the erstwhile unassailability of the developmental-authoritarian state would not have been so easily challenged. By 1998, concepts of democracy, government accountability, and human rights had begun to take on a more universal ring among a wider constituency. There was a more acute realization of government economic mismanagement. The palpable experience of civil freedoms being violated were subsequently felt by *Reformasi*, activists whose activities were curtailed either by police violence or by state employment of draconian laws to frustrate the rise of any credible opposition force.[31]

Also interesting is that in the country's 1999 general election, women voters, women's causes, and the women's movement gained more attention than at any other time. Although the election did not lead to substantial gains for women's rights in terms of policies and equality, there was nevertheless a visible improvement in terms of women's representation at the legislative level. The outcome of the election saw more women elected into parliament than ever before, with twenty women parliamentarians comprising 10.4 percent of the House of Representatives, as compared to 7.8 percent in 1995 and 6.1 percent in 1990. The election also delivered a larger number of women opposition leaders to parliament compared with previous elections. The four women opposition leaders accounted for 9 percent of the opposition seats while government women representatives comprised 11 percent of the seats won by the ruling coalition party.

There are two reasons why the period leading up to the country's recent election saw the marked politicization and co-optation of women's issues. First, from the opposition perspective, it had to do with the entry of Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the wife of Anwar Ibrahim, as a leading icon of opposition forces. She became the leader of the newly-formed opposition party, the National Justice Party, and had quickly become a popular figure in the *Reformasi* movement. In a way, her thrust into politics had stoked the public imagination about the importance of gender in the politics of change and democratization.[32] There was an irony in this situation. While the *Reformasi* movement

was rallying behind a woman leader, the strongest force in this solidarity "front" of diverse social groups and political parties was PAS, whose leaders and policies were muted when it came to supporting feminist rights.

Second, from the government viewpoint, faced with mounting public disaffection, only a strategy that could effectively disparage the strongest opposition party, the Islamic Party, would save the incumbent government from possible electoral defeat. The use of the "gender card" by the incumbent government killed two birds with one stone. By appeasing the liberal constituents (rather than just women) with promises and commitments to women's rights, the Mahathir government hoped to divert the support of women and the middle-classes away from Wan Azizah by offsetting the impression that her leadership would necessarily augur women's empowerment. The gender strategy was aimed at turning women, non-Malays, and liberals away from PAS, because its misogynistic policies, which the government widely emphasized, only promised the bleakest of prospects for women's advancement.

But for opposition politics, there was also an opportunity to test the limits of feminism and its acceptance among voters. The Islamic Party was thrown into a dilemma between upholding strategies that might be in conflict with its conservative stance on gender rights and the need to abandon such an ideological position in order to be unified within the coalition. It ultimately chose to back a feminist candidate, who contested on the opposition ticket. For example, it threw its support behind Zaitun Kassim, who contested under the ticket of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) with feminism as her platform. PAS, unlike the DAP, had superior election machinery, so it was this that ensured the success of Zaitun Kassim's campaign.[33] In this instance, PAS was quite willing to cooperate with a woman candidate of another coalition partner although it did not field any women candidates of its own.[34]

Malaysia's political crisis and the realignment of ruling and opposition forces marked an important historical watershed. Since government credibility had suffered because of the crisis, there was an opening provided by such cracks. Opposition forces and the broad spectrum of civil society were able to renew, reorganize, and reassess their roles in affecting the course of possible transformations. Examples elsewhere (such as Latin America) have also shown that different opposition parties will be compelled to bury their varied and contra-

dictory principles in order to form a united front for electoral gain. The regime will also be pushed into adopting uncharacteristic measures to counter the concerted challenge.[35]

This discussion has shown that the issue of why women cannot be organized within a united feminist movement revolves around their manifold interests and identities. However, the study has shown that conditions can exist — no matter how momentary or partial — that enable the reconstruction of identities to support emerging interests, and, to a certain extent, engender shared visions out of multiple identities. A particular and localized condition, such as "Malay" Islamization, did not necessarily mitigate the acceptance of a "universalized" value, such as human rights and democracy, during the phase of *Reformasi*. Values are fluid enough to enable them to be expediently constructed or deconstructed to take on either a universalized or a localized form. However, in grappling with the above issues, one may also need to ask how long a "politics of solidarity in difference"[36] can last in a multiethnic and plural society like Malaysia, especially when the common enemy, in the form of a perceived dictatorial order, is no longer present?

I argued from the outset that Malaysia's racial politics may not easily lead to the cultivation of a multicultural democracy or positive diversity. State development policies, exemplified by the NEP, have explicitly set apart the status and interests of one ethnic community from another, leading to the hyperethnicization of political, cultural, and social life. Within this paradigm, women's common causes have had a limited chance of being sustained. Furthermore, women articulate their needs and rights differently and sometimes in contradictory ways.[37] However, the pressure for women to converge over common issues began to be felt as soon as the legitimacy of the "Malay dominant" state was subjected to a challenge. Although the *Reformasi* period was akin to a phase in which there was a kind of "social unmooring" from "stable and hierarchical communal structures,"[38] it may take some time before a reorganization of fixed identities and, ultimately, the development of new forms of agency will be fully realized.

V. Conclusion: Continuing the Search for Human Rights and a Multicultural Democracy

As Malaysia today struggles to cope with its brand of political and economic uncertainties, it will also have to deal with the new challenge of

pluralism as expressed by the demands for a more Islamized political community. The emergence of struggles to enlarge the jurisdiction of Islamic laws as well as calls for the eventual creation of an Islamic state are some of the newer issues that will plague the leadership of the country. The early social contract worked out by elite representatives of the various communities is being challenged on many fronts. The non-*Bumiputera* population of the country would like to see the dismantling of racial preferential policies (entrenched in the Constitution) that obstruct the recognition of citizenship rights as the foundational basis for equality.

On the other end, Malays will continue to assert their claim to political dominance. It will not be focused so much on the notion of ethnic supremacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*) as on their inalienable right to observe their particularistic system of beliefs and faith, which is Islam. Islam will be further waxed to become the unchallengeable demarcation for difference and will be employed to legitimate the setting up of an alternative system of governance, either to coexist with existing secular institutions or to displace the old system altogether. This is the basis of the present contention in Malaysian politics. The debate about the suitability of an Islamic system imposed upon a plural society like Malaysia will center around several issues, namely, the citizenship status of non-Muslims, the question of gender equality, and the right of individuals to religious autonomy. Can tensions within diversity be resolved by setting up parallel systems of governance, one set applicable for Muslims and the other for non-Muslims? If all cultures and religious traditions were to be accepted as having equal worth, then how can all of these demands, many of which are of a conflicting nature, be accommodated in multiethnic Malaysia? If gender equality is a principle that women (or at least a great many women) want to translate into pragmatic policy, then how can this principle be allowed to be invalidated by a religious system that privileges a male-centric discourse and outlook?

The intersection of gender, race, and religion in post-developmental Malaysia has produced the above set of questions. Gender, race, and religion have always constituted the multifaceted political and cultural paradigm serving to energize the imaginations of expedient state players but also to enervate the strength of civil society, which is trying to chart a straight path toward enlightened liberalism and a workable multicultural democracy. From Malaysia's phase of nationalist strivings until the current manifestation of post-developmentalism, the

intersection of gender, race, and religion has taken on many shifting dimensions. It has become the mirror of a ceaseless experiment mounted by the state and civil society to manage the pluralism in their midst. ◉

Notes

1. This latest census is reported in "Census Shows More Malays, Smaller Percentage of Chinese, Indians," *www.malaysiakini.com* (7 November 2001).

2. Pang 2001, pp. 582–583.

3. Ibid., p. 583.

4. This oversimplified collapsing of the three categories of race belies the diversity of the multiethnic communities that actually existed in the country under colonialism. Although the Malays and indigenous tribal communities were the earliest settlers of Malaya (the name used to refer to the current peninsular West Malaysia), immigrants who came to settle in the land came from various parts of the world. The early censuses in Malaya were more cognizant of the numerous variety of ethnic categories then being used. See Nagata, *The Malaysian Mosaic* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1976).

5. Manderson 1980; Dancz 1987; Mohamad 2002.

6. Khoo 1994, pp. 1–2.

7. Ibid., p. 3.

8. This information was given by F.R. Bhupalan in 1995. My speculation is that the Women Teacher's Union must have been one of the earliest associations that had a multiracial women's membership. To date, there is a dearth of study of this association.

9. Dancz 1987, pp. 139–141.

10. Ibid., p. 140.

11. Ramli 1998.

12. Ibrahim 1998.

13. Ramli 1998.

14. Lee and Clark 2000, p. 19.

15. In Malaysia, the identity of "race" is virtually predetermined. Being Malay also means being Muslim, according to its constitution. Further, Malays and other indigenous communities are conferred the status of *Bumiputeras*, literally, "sons of the soil." Under the aegis of the NEP, which was promulgated in 1972, *Bumiputeras* are entitled to special privileges or subsidies, ranging from places in higher education to preferential credit access.

16. Kessler 1992, p. 139.

17. Jesudason 1996.

18. Munro-Kua 1996.

19. The concepts of *pragmatic acquiescence* and *instrumental acceptance* are borrowed from Held 1997, p. 182.

20. Heng 1988; Tan 1992.

21. It is sometimes jocularly said that "freedom" among non-Muslims is now reduced to having the social and legal license to drink, eat pork, gamble, and dress as one pleases. For example, one letter writer to the Internet newspaper *Malaysiakini*, dated January 17, 2001, had this to say: "Years away from its socialist origins, DAP is more immediately concerned about such issues as the right to be agnostic, to gamble, and to drink liquor. These were the nuts and bolts for playing racial politics, a ploy that has long been successful." The freedom to openly and publicly practice religious and traditional rituals, such as religious processions, is considered to be one of the highest tests of the state's ability to accommodate ethnic rights. The ruling National Front government uses these indicators of "tolerance" in election campaigns to affirm its credentials as the only legitimate arbiter of inter-ethnic relations.

22. Von Vorys 1975, pp. 386–387.

23. Tan 1999.

24. Lim 1978; Grossman 1979.

25. Ong 1987, p. 183.

26. Ibid., p. 185.

27. Shamsul 1986.

28. Hashim 1996.

29. Othman 1996.

30. For details, see Weiss 1999; Subramaniam 2001; and Mohamad 2001.

31. The Malaysian National Commission of Human Rights (Suhakam) conducted an enquiry on allegations of police brutality against protestors at the Kesas Highway rally in 2000. The report, which came out in 2001, indicated that the government had clearly violated the rights of the peaceful protestors when police violence was used against them. In April 2001, several leading figures of the opposition National Justice Party were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act.

32. She later stood for the parliamentary seat previously occupied by Anwar and won it with a convincing majority.

33. She did not win the seat but reduced the winning margin of the incumbent candidate by a substantial number of votes.

34. Being Muslim, she was often cajoled during the campaign period to put on the veil when she had to address a crowd together with male Islamic party speakers. She refused but was not rebuked in any way, perhaps because the campaign period was too short and critical to allow for any dissension to develop.

35. Jaquette 1991, p. 13.

36. Lister 1997, p. 80.

37. Although there have been attempts by Tan (1999) to show that an alliance among many diverse Malaysian women's groups was possible in the case of lobbying for the country's Domestic Violence Act, the mobilization of women in this case was still limited to an exclusive segment of civil society, namely, middle-class feminist groups with the backing of the country's oldest, mainstream women's organization.

38. Mann 1997, pp. 226–117.

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